

Abstract 514

TITLE: The Fernwood Project: Student Response to Classroom-Based HIV Education

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BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES: It is increasingly recognized that effective HIV education must begin before children and adolescents initiate behaviors that put them at risk for HIV infection, yet little research has focused on interventions for students in middle schools, where sociopolitical and pedagogical issues are likely to be especially intense. We report on 6th and 8th grade students' response to an explicit, age-appropriate, and student-centered HIV prevention curriculum presented by trained classroom teachers.

METHODS: We employed a multi-method design to explore students' experiences. Instruments were based on validated questionnaires developed and tested by the CDC and used by other HIV prevention programs in these in the evaluation and received pre/post questionnaires. The 6th graders also participated in a delayed posttest 3 months following the intervention. Baseline data were collected in demographically similar control schools. Individual students' responses were linked over two data points (n = 331, 8th grade) and three data points (n = 381, 6th grade) using a stable student-generated code. Changes from pretest to posttest were evaluated by t-test; trends from pretest through delayed posttest were evaluated using one-way Analysis of Variance. Focus group interviews and classroom observation of student participation, and surveying of teachers and administrators, provided contextual data useful for interpretation of quantitative data.

RESULTS: At pretest, there were no patterned differences between target and control schools in any of the districts tested. At posttest, changes in knowledge, attitudes and beliefs for both 6th and 8th grade were robust and positive (p<.05) on nearly all questions. Changes from pretest through delayed post test remained strong (p<.05) on nearly all questions. Student recognition of safe vs. unsafe activities increased significantly (p<.05) on nearly all questions. Students exhibited a significant increase (p<.05) in their comfort discussing issues around HIV. Very few changes were noted in behavior or intended behavior probably because most students in this age range are not generally involved in high-risk behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS: The Fernwood Project trained classroom teachers to conduct explicit, student-centered HIV education in pedagogically and socially conservative communities. The students who received this instruction exhibited significant and robust gains in knowledge, attitudes, expectations and comfort in talking about HIV risk factors. Moreover, the communities supported the use of these explicit materials in the middle grades. The data suggest that explicit, age-appropriate HIV prevention education can be conducted successfully by classroom teachers in socially conservative communities.

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